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Sun-Sentinel (Fort Lauderdale, Florida)

November 19, 2015 Thursday
Broward Metro Edition

Judge orders shelter for teens to close; Lauderdale neighbors have complained for 6 years about crime and unruly behavior

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SECTION: LOCAL; Pg. 3B {ZONE} SB

LENGTH: 339 words

DATELINE: FORT LAUDERDALE

-- A special magistrate has given the state-owned Crescent House shelter for teenage boys until Dec. 17 to cease operations, saying it is a nuisance that violates city zoning rules.

Special Magistrate Mark Purdy sided with the city and neighbors who complained teens at the shelter were causing crime and other problems and were not being controlled by their supervisors. Purdy also said the shelter -- which has been at the same location more than 20 years -- does not meet zoning rules that allow a maximum of four residents in a group home in the South Middle River neighborhood.

"I think that this could set a precedent for other municipalities to use code enforcement to move out other shelters and group homes," said Eddy Lacasa, chief operating officer for Chrysalis Health, that runs the shelter for the Florida Department of Children & Families. "It does set a bad precedent so I don't think the state is going to let it go lightly."

Lacasa said DCF officials were meeting with the state Attorney General's Office on the issue. The magistrate's order does not say how the shelter can come into compliance short of closure.

"The parties involved are actively reviewing the

special magistrate's ruling to determine the next steps," regional DCF spokeswoman Paige Patterson-Hughes said.

For neighbors, the ruling culminated an effort six years in the making as they complained that criminal activity and unruly behavior by Crescent House teens were making them prisoners in their own homes.

"This was huge," said Sal Gatanio, former president of the South Middle River Civic Association. But he's under no illusion the matter is closed.

"We won the first battle of the war," Gatanio said. "I have a feeling there's going to be a lot more that they're going to try to come back with."

Crescent House, 1135 NW Seventh Ave., is owned by the state, which contracts with ChildNet to run the center. ChildNet has contracted with Chrysalis Health since 2002 to manage the day-to-day operations of the center.

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LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

PUBLICATION-TYPE: Newspaper

SUBJECT: MAGISTRATES (93%); NEGATIVE PERSONAL NEWS (90%); NUISANCE (90%); JUDGES (90%); CITY GOVERNMENT (90%); ADOLESCENTS (90%); CRIME LAW ENFORCEMENT & CORRECTIONS (89%); BUSINESS CLOSINGS (78%); MEN (78%); US STATE GOVERNMENT (78%); MANAGERS & SUPERVISORS (77%); EXECUTIVES (76%); FAMILY (75%); ASSOCIATIONS & ORGANIZATIONS (75%); ATTORNEYS GENERAL (67%); CHILD WELFARE (53%) TEEN; HOUSING; CLOSING

CITY: FORT LAUDERDALE, FL, USA (75%)

STATE: FLORIDA, USA (79%)

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COUNTRY: UNITED STATES (79%)

LOAD-DATE: November 20, 2015

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